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Student and employer perceptions of British Higher Education in the Arabian Gulf region

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of students and employers in two Arabian Gulf countries of the HND and British higher education in general. The need for a higher education qualifications framework and an effective system for assessing the quality and standards of British universities and their programmes offered overseas are considered in the context of the UK achieving its government's market share targets for international fee-paying higher education. Discovers that student satisfaction with the HND was high among the student sample in the two Gulf countries, and that British higher education is generally well respected among both students and employers worldwide. Argues that with increasing competition in the international higher education market, the UK government and UK universities must take greater care to consider overseas markets when making HE policy decisions if the export of British higher education is to be successfully increased.

Keywords: Higher education, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sultanate of Oman, export of higher education, emiritisation, omanisation, student and employer perceptions, quality assurance

Introduction

The internationalisation of higher education is one feature of the general trend towards globalisation in trade, commerce and communication. The internationalisation of higher education comes in many forms: universities attracting foreign students, distance learning, cross-border co-operation between two or more universities (e.g. through joint programmes or the sharing of human resources), schemes and agreements for cross-border student mobility (e.g. SOCRATES and LEONARDO), overseas branch campuses, franchised programmes with affiliated institutions abroad and awarding bodies offering qualifications overseas, e.g. BTEC, a division of the Edexcel Foundation, offers its Higher National Diploma (HND) internationally including in the Arabian Gulf region. This paper is concerned mainly with the last three, that is to say, the export of higher education by British institutions directly to foreign students in their home country through branch campuses or

franchised programmes, and qualifications accredited by British awarding bodies.

The aims of this study are to explore the drive by the UK government, universities and awarding bodies to expand their share of the international fee-paying market for higher education, to investigate the role and implementation of British higher education in two Arabian Gulf countries, to examine the perceptions of both students and employers in the two countries of the HND and British higher education in general, and to consider the need for a HE qualifications framework and an effective system for assessing the quality and standards of British universities and their programmes offered overseas.

This paper is intended to fill a gap in the literature, as there has been very little published about either the HND or higher education in the Arabian Gulf region. Although the Arabian Gulf region is assumed as typical of overseas markets for British higher education, and while it is observed that the Middle East is already a large market, the author believes that there is plenty of potential to significantly increase it, especially at the sub-degree and bachelor degree levels. At the present time, most of the awards offered by British universities in the Gulf are at the postgraduate level with the MBA being by far the most popular qualification.

The export of higher education from Britain

For generations Britain's leading universities have attracted foreign students. In 1996 there were 198,000 international students studying in institutions of higher education in the UK. This represented a 17 per cent market share of the international fee-paying market studying in English speaking countries (British Council, 1999a, p. 3). The UK government's target is to increase Britain's market share to 25 per cent by 2005 (British Council, 1999a, p. 3). The USA is by far the market leader and other major competitors include Australia and Canada. The countries of the Middle East generate about 7 per cent of the world's international fee paying students studying in an English speaking country (British Council, 1999a, p. 3).

Increasing competition at home, decreasing public funds for higher education and the general trend towards globalisation have all encouraged British universities to look at ways to expand their operations overseas. Many have utilised the new information and communication technologies to offer innovative distance learning programmes. Others have preferred to stick with the bricks and mortar approach operating either through affiliated institutions or branch campuses. The number of foreign students taking British university courses overseas has expanded from almost nothing fifteen years ago to over 100,000 today (Buerkle, 1999).

In June 1999 the UK government launched a campaign to promote British further and higher education overseas, specifically to attract more international students to the UK. Since January 2000 the British Council has been responsible for leading a three-year global marketing campaign. The

purpose of the British Council is to promote the United Kingdom internationally as a provider and partner in the fields of education, training, human resource development, business and trade, science and technology, tourism and the arts. The British Council operates through an international network of offices in 109 countries.

In November 1997 the UK government established British Training International (BTI) with the mission to establish the UK as the recognised world leader in providing vocational education, training and related services. In November 2000 BTI merged with the British Council, and since then BTI has become the vocational education and training promotions team within the British Council (British Training International, 2000). This division of the British Council offers advice and support to many countries, including the Sultanate of Oman, on various aspects of vocational education and training.

British higher education in Oman and the UAE

British higher education has a presence in several countries in the Arabian Gulf region, but is particularly well established in the Sultanate of Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The data for this study came from the UAE and Oman only. During the last three years the degrees of at least sixteen different UK universities have been offered by institutions in the UAE. These universities have included Bournemouth, Bradford, Glasgow, Hull, Leeds Metropolitan, Leicester, Newcastle, Sheffield and Strathclyde. Restrictions on business ownership has discouraged any British university from establishing an overseas branch campus in the UAE, so that all qualifications, mainly bachelor's and master's degrees in business, management and information technology have been delivered by local colleges and training institutions on a franchise or collaborative basis. Apart from a handful of private American universities, the only foreign university to have established a campus in the UAE is the Australian University of Wollongong, which has had a presence in Dubai since 1993.

Several British universities also offer their qualifications in Oman. BTEC's Higher National Diploma (HND) is available at several institutions in both the UAE and Oman, and BTEC maintains a regional office in Muscat, the capital of Oman.

The role of education in labour nationalisation in Oman and the UAE

With the discovery and then the production of oil in most of the Gulf countries from the 1970s, their economies expanded very rapidly and most had to take huge numbers of foreign workers to maintain their rates of growth. Various factors have now encouraged countries such as Oman and the UAE to embark upon programmes of labour nationalisation: their birth rates are relatively high, the young are increasingly educated, youth unemployment is high and their rates of economic growth have slowed. The Gulf countries now need to reduce their reliance on expatriate labour and increase the participation of nationals in the labour market. All have acknowledged the role of education, and particularly that of further and higher education, in

developing their nation's human resources. Each country has developed its own individual strategies and policies to encourage the process of labour nationalisation. In Oman this process is known as "omanisation", and in the UAE as "emiratisation".

Oman is the only country in the world to have wholly adopted the British competence-based training model (British Council, 1999b, p. 3). Thousands of young Omanis have been enrolled on college-based GNVQs (General National Vocational Qualification) and work-based NVQs (National Vocational Qualification). Advanced GNVQ courses are delivered over three years as they include a one-year foundation course in English language. For a limited range of occupational areas, such as carpentry, construction and mechanical and electrical engineering, the Sultanate has introduced Omani Vocational Qualifications (OVQs), which are delivered in the Arabic language at a number of state-run Vocational Training Centres (Al-Dhahab, 1997, p. 2; British Council, 1999b, p. 3). The Omani government's decision to use NVQs and GNVQs as the major qualifications to develop the nation's human resources has stimulated interest in other British qualifications, such as the HND and qualifications in English language, and in British higher education in general.

A number of factors explain why Oman adopted the British competence-based system. As is the case with most of the largest overseas markets for British higher education, Britain has historical ties with Oman and business is still conducted largely in the English language. A royal decree established the Vocational Training Authority (VTA) in 1991 in support of the country's fourth Five-Year Development Plan (1991 - 1995) which aimed to achieve further significant human resource development in the Sultanate. The VTA sought advice and guidance from a range of British consultants and educational advisors. These "advisors" recommended the British competence-based system and the VTA recognised that British vocational qualifications could act as one of the catalysts to aid the process of omanisation. Awarding bodies such as Edexcel BTEC and the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Examinations Board were quick to set up offices in the Sultanate and to make their qualifications widely available. The UK's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) became the official partner to oversee implementation of the qualifications and the establishment and maintenance of quality assurance systems. However, the great uptake of British vocational qualifications in the Sultanate may be due largely to the willingness of Omani nationals to take up training in different trades and occupations, and at all levels. In most of the Gulf countries, nationals refuse to take up employment in manual or craft-based trades. It is this fact that makes Oman unique in the Gulf region.

In the UAE, the state institutions of further and higher education include the United Arab Emirates University, established in 1977, Zayed University, established in 1999 and currently still with two campuses for females only, and the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT), which were established in 1988 and which now have separate male and female campuses in all of the major towns and cities. The HCT offer Certificate, Diploma and Higher Diploma programmes in a range of subjects including Business, Information

Technology, Health Sciences, Engineering and Education. Dubai Polytechnic, the institute of the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry exempts HCT graduates with a Higher Diploma from the first year of its BTEC HND programmes. The BTEC HND at Dubai Polytechnic has traditionally attracted both UAE nationals and expatriates. Of the students participating in the survey at the UAE college, 48 per cent were UAE nationals.

In September 2000 Dubai Polytechnic introduced a range of bachelor's degrees (BA, BBA, BSc), which it hopes will be accredited by the UAE Ministry of Higher Education by the end of 2001. This is of crucial importance to UAE nationals as virtually no foreign qualifications offered in the UAE are currently accredited by the Ministry. The UAE's public sector is only permitted to recognise accredited qualifications when making decisions about appointments or salaries. Employment in the public sector is still the preferred choice of most UAE nationals as the salaries are usually higher and working hours shorter than jobs in the private sector. Until very recently, many nationals did not realise that if they gained a foreign degree in the UAE it would have little value in the labour market of their own nation. Curiously, degrees and diplomas gained abroad *are* recognised. In September 2000 Dubai Polytechnic found that virtually no one wanted the HND. The HND in Business, which had been attracting over 100 candidates per intake two years earlier, failed to attract sufficient candidates to run. In contrast, the demand for the new BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) exceeded all forecasts.

Whereas Oman's omanisation policy aims to get Omani nationals into all types of jobs and at all levels, the UAE's policy currently focuses on placing nationals in managerial positions or in professions requiring higher technical skills. Most young Emiratis have no desire to take up employment which lacks status or which involves working with their hands or working outdoors. However, the Arab culture does respect and value education, and most parents want their children to achieve some higher education. Many students opt for foreign qualifications because they perceive them as carrying more prestige or because they want to complete their education overseas, but some students resort to foreign qualifications only when they fail in their own national system.

The BTEC Higher National Diploma

The HND is one of BTEC's most popular qualifications. It has been designed to meet the following aims (Edexcel Foundation, 1998, p. 2):

- To provide an educational foundation relevant to individual vocations and professions in which students are working or intend to seek employment.
- To enable students to make an immediate contribution in employment.
- To provide flexibility, knowledge, skills and motivation as a basis for future studies and career development.
- To develop a range of skills and techniques, personal qualities and attitudes essential for successful performance in working life.

The HND is offered in a variety of vocational subject areas including Computing, Travel & Tourism and Business, the latter being available with a

number of specialisms (pathways) such as Finance, Marketing and Personnel. Candidates are usually at least 18 years of age on enrolment and they normally have at least one GCE A Level pass, or an equivalent qualification, or suitable work experience. The programme is usually made available to anyone who can achieve the required standard without any artificial barriers that may restrict entry or progression.

Full-time students normally take two years to achieve the HND while part-time students usually take three, although this may vary depending on prior experience and learning. To achieve an HND, students must complete sixteen units (subjects) while completion of ten units gives a student the Higher National Certificate (HNC). Varied and on-going assessment methods are a key feature of the HND.

Fisher (1998) reported that BTEC qualifications are well regarded by most employers in the UK and that the programmes usually motivate students and improve their understanding, confidence and competence. The status and credibility of the HND have often been questioned, however, because the qualification does not typically attract the students with the highest academic attainment and because pass rates are high (Fisher, 1998).

BTEC qualifications are available in over 100 different countries worldwide. Several hundred candidates enrol on HND programmes in the Arabian Gulf countries each year. The elitist snobbery that still exists in the UK, which frowns upon the HND and vocational education in general, is less pronounced in the Gulf region although a great proportion of students do hope to eventually achieve an MBA or master's degree. Many students accept, however, that a Higher Diploma is a realistic target in their higher education given their academic ability and attainment, which is often hindered by insufficient fluency in the English language. For many students the HND offers a quicker and more affordable alternative to degree study while progression to a degree remains an option after achievement of the HND.

Virtually all of the institutions offering the HND in either the UAE or Oman do so on both a full-time and part-time (usually evenings) basis. Bachelor degree programmes are often offered only in full-time mode. The HND has found itself a niche by providing access to a HE qualification for mature and working candidates. It has been successful in attracting part-time enrolments and this is reflected in the fact that 38.5 per cent of the student sample in this study were studying on a part-time basis.

A significant proportion of HND graduates progress to top-up bachelor degree programmes which are usually taken either one year full-time or two years part-time. 80 per cent of the sample in the UAE institution (52 per cent in the Oman institution) planned to progress to a bachelor's degree, while only 24 per cent intended to start a new job (36 per cent in Oman). Post-survey follow-up revealed that the vast majority of students wishing to progress from an HND to degree study were successful in doing so, either continuing with their existing institution, transferring to another institution in their home country, or transferring to a university in the UK or in another overseas

country. Of the HND Business graduates completing in June 2000 ($n = 30$) at the UAE college, 53 per cent (16 students) progressed to the institution's own BA top-up programme accredited by Leeds Metropolitan University, 10 per cent (3 students) left to continue their higher education in the UK, and the remainder either took up new employment, continued working for their previous employer with no further study, or transferred to study with a competitor in the UAE (thought to be less than 10 per cent).

The only problem identified with regard to the progression of HND graduates to a top-up bachelor's degree concerned a group of students who had completed the institution-developed HND in Tourism and Hospitality Management at the UAE college. There were not enough successful and interested students to make viable the BA top-up programme in International Tourism and Hospitality Management, which was to be offered and accredited by Bournemouth University. Leeds Metropolitan University refused the HND tourism graduates admission to their top-up BA degrees in Business (offered at the UAE college) arguing that the students did not possess some of the required underpinning knowledge which the accepted students had gained from various off-the-shelf BTEC HND programmes in Business. The UAE college was unable, therefore, to offer progression to a degree for this group of tourism students. This problem was known to the students at the time they completed the questionnaire and so the fact is likely to have affected some of their responses.

Examination of the minutes of HND course leaders' meetings at the UAE college revealed that it is commonly believed by the course leaders that many students enrol on HND programmes without having any true understanding about vocational education, student-centred learning, continuous assessment methods or how the HND compares to other international or national academic qualifications. Students are often slow to understand concepts like "common/key skills" and the need to produce assignments which don't simply restate theory but which relate theory to practice with explanation and analysis.

This study examines the reasons why students in Oman and the UAE chose to do an HND and what their post-experience perceptions and opinions about it are. It may also be interesting to consider why educational institutions in the Gulf region choose to offer the HND. The reasons may include the fact that the heads of institutions or decision makers are British or have links with the UK (e.g. it may be where they themselves studied), because of the country's historical links with the UK, because of the generally good reputation of British education or of individual institutions or providers, because of the uniqueness of qualifications such as HND, and because of the advice and support offered by individuals (e.g. consultants) and organisations such as the British Council and BTI.

Research methodology

This study made use of two questionnaires. They were designed to discover the perceptions and opinions of students and employers in the Arabian Gulf

region of the HND and of British higher education in general. The first questionnaire was distributed in May 2000 to final year HND students (graduating in June or December 2000) in two institutions, one in the UAE and one in Oman. Both institutions are private/quasi-government colleges of higher education offering a mix of both off-the-shelf BTEC HND programmes and institution-developed programmes accredited by BTEC. Whether the programme was off-the-shelf or developed by the institution did not seem to have any significant influence on the responses given by the survey participants. Most of the institution-developed HNDs were planned and structured in partnership with a UK university thereby ensuring progression for students to a top-up degree programme either at the local institution where they achieved their HND or at the UK university.

The student questionnaire had ten questions in addition to the required personal data responses about the gender, age, nationality, course taken and mode of study of the respondents. The questionnaire had questions with a Likert rating scale, list or category questions, a yes/no question and two open questions. The questions covered, among other things, the reasons for their choice of course and institution, their rating of the HND overall, their opinion on its usefulness as a preparation for employment, how they (the students) thought employers viewed the HND, and their perception of British higher education generally.

The size and composition of the student sample with respect to course studied and the country in which it was taken is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Size and composition of the student sample.

HND	UAE	OMAN	TOTAL
Business	27	22	49
Business Information Technology	23	3	26
Graphic Design	5		5
Media & Marketing	8		8
Tourism & Hospitality Management	16		16
	79	25	104

Of the total student sample, 37.5 per cent were male, 62.5 per cent were female, 52 per cent were aged under 22, 43 per cent were aged between 22 and 30, and 5 per cent were aged over 30. Some 61.5 per cent of students were studying full-time and 38.5 per cent part-time. In the Oman college, 92 per cent of the sample were Omani nationals. In the UAE college only 48 per cent were UAE nationals, 13 per cent were from other Arab speaking countries, 24 per cent were Asian (with the majority from India) and the remainder came from a variety of countries including Iran, the UK and the Philippines.

The employer questionnaire was sent to the human resource departments of ninety-nine large companies with a head office in Dubai, the leading emirate of the UAE for international trade and commerce. The companies were all listed in a book called "The Top Companies in Dubai" which is published by the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry and which gives details of 100 companies (DCCI, 1998). One of these companies could not be traced, hence the sample size of ninety-nine. The criteria used for inclusion in the book include capital value, labour, market value, quality, excellence in their field, and those companies that contributed significantly to local economic development. The companies represent a good mix of locally owned organisations, organisations from other Arab countries with a country or regional head office in Dubai and other multi-nationals. A high proportion of the companies operate in other Gulf countries and therefore it was felt that the sample was fairly representative of companies throughout the Gulf region.

Responses were received from twenty-two organisations, giving a response rate of just over 22 per cent. The respondents operate in a range of industries including oil, manufacturing, trading and services. The questionnaire consisted of mainly list or category questions, some with a Likert rating scale. The questionnaires were returned anonymously although some respondents signed their name and position or included a compliment slip or business card. The positions given included Head of Human Resources, Human Resource Development Manager and Training Manager. The questions covered, among other things, their familiarity with HND, how well they think the HND prepares students for work in their organisation, their general opinion of the HND and their overall view of British higher education in the Gulf region.

Results

The most common reasons given by respondents (n=104) for choosing to do an HND were that they wanted a British qualification (39 per cent of respondents), that they wanted a course with a flexible structure and flexible attendance requirements (37 per cent), that they were motivated by links between their college and local organisations such as chambers of commerce which either directly or indirectly seemed to support or validate the HND (31 per cent) and that they were attracted by relevant and vocational course content (24 per cent). The ranking of factors determining the decision of respondents to do an HND was similar in both the UAE and the Oman college. However, in the Oman college only 4 per cent of respondents mentioned that they had been motivated to take their course because of its content. 20 per cent of the respondents at the Oman college took the HND as a last resort as they didn't get accepted elsewhere. No one at the UAE college admitted to taking the HND as a last resort.

Whatever their reasons for taking an HND, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the programme overall; 8 per cent rated it "excellent", 36 per cent "very good", and 50 per cent "good", with the remainder rating it "poor" (4 per cent) or "very poor" (2 per cent). Although the respondents were supposed to be assessing their programme it was clear from their responses

that some were assessing their institution or their lecturers even though the questionnaire was designed to avoid this problem. The distributions of ratings were fairly similar at the UAE and Oman college, although they were slightly better at the UAE college. Some 81 per cent of the total student sample said that they would recommend the HND to their friends, relatives or work colleagues.

Of the students, 59 per cent intended to progress to a British top-up bachelor's degree when they completed their HND, 14 per cent said they would progress to a non-British bachelor's degree (either locally or overseas), 27 per cent said that they would start a new job while 7 per cent said they would take a professional qualification. Some 27 per cent of the respondents believed that the HND prepared them for employment "very well", 49 per cent thought "a bit", 19 per cent "not very much" and the remainder (4 per cent) "not at all". One student gave no reply. Some 42 per cent of employers participating in the study reported that they employed staff with an HND. Amongst these employers, 22 per cent of these employers believed that the HND had prepared employees for work in their organisation "very well", 56 per cent said "a bit", 11 per cent "not very much" and 11 per cent "not at all".

The students were asked how they thought local employers perceived the HND. There was an extraordinarily good correlation between the students' perception and the actual response given by employers. Of the students, 59 per cent thought that employers respected and/or recognised the HND; the actual percentage of employers in the sample reporting that they recognised and respected the HND was also exactly 59 per cent. Some 38 per cent of the students thought that employers don't really know about the HND while, yet again, exactly 38 per cent of the employers admitted to not being familiar with the HND.

Although 39 per cent of the students doing an HND chose to do it because they wanted a British qualification, 62 per cent believed that the UK offers the best higher education worldwide, 40 per cent thought that it is the USA while only 8 per cent mentioned their own country. Employers were unable to distinguish between British and American higher education offered locally although 55 per cent believed that British higher education was better than the education provided by local state universities and colleges. However, employers were asked who they would recruit if they had two identical job applicants but one had an American bachelor's degree and the other had a British one. 60 per cent said that they would pick the candidate with the American degree while the remaining 40 per cent said they would pick the British one. The employers reported that they actually recruited more graduates from local universities awarding American degrees rather than British ones, but this is not surprising as there are far more students entering local labour markets with an American degree. The three largest non-state universities in the UAE all have ties with the USA rather than the UK. Because of the labour nationalisation policies that exist in all of the Arabian Gulf countries, there is strong political pressure, supported also with legislation, for organisations to favour employing nationals with mainly locally accredited qualifications rather than expatriates with international qualifications. In the

UAE, degrees which are taken locally but accredited from overseas are not formally recognised, and therefore nationals holding them may be denied suitable employment in the public sector. For this reason, many nationals feel that they are forced to go to the state universities and colleges.

Quality of British higher education overseas

It is the intention of the British government that the quality and academic standards of all UK university awards offered overseas are comparable to the programmes delivered to students in the UK. In addition, the overall learning and educational experience delivered to students overseas should be comparable to that being delivered to students on the same courses in the UK. All aspects of programme delivery, support for students and resources, e.g. library and IT facilities, are considered. The former Higher Education Quality Council published in 1996 the Code of Practice for Overseas Collaborative Provision in Higher Education. The code offers guidance on good practice and provides a framework within which institutions can review and consider their current and future activities.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the body responsible for undertaking regular academic quality audits of individual institutions, both at home and overseas, to review the operation and effectiveness of arrangements for assuring quality and standards. The audits of the QAA are intended to help maintain confidence in the work of British universities operating overseas.

In several of the Arabian Gulf countries foreign organisations are only allowed to operate in co-operation with a local partner. For this reason there are few wholly owned branch campuses of foreign universities in this region. The legislative framework forces UK universities operating in countries such as the UAE to form collaborative agreements with local institutions. These local institutions may be university sector colleges (such as Dubai Polytechnic) that deliver UK accredited programmes with their own staff or, at the other extreme, as with Al Banna International and the University of Bradford, the local organisation simply acts as an agent to generate and process applications and to maintain the administrative systems while the UK university provides the staff to deliver the programmes, usually in short intensive blocks.

Between September and November 1997 the QAA visited several institutions in the Gulf region (QAA, 1998a; QAA, 1998b; QAA, 1999a; QAA, 1999b). In several cases the audit team found it difficult to accept that students in the Gulf countries were receiving a learning and educational experience that was comparable to their counterparts in the UK or to those in other countries where the same programme was being delivered.

Some of the problems that were identified included frequent loosening of entry requirements (e.g. under-aged candidates with GCSEs or 'O' Levels being admitted directly to higher education programmes and MBA candidates admitted with only two or three years management experience when the

requirement was five years), high failure rates, unsatisfactory teaching accommodation, unsatisfactory learning resources, students with unsatisfactory English language and IT skills, high levels of student plagiarism, poor course monitoring systems and staff delivering and managing programmes who had no previous experience of British higher education.

Most of the collaborative agreements with UK universities were formed during the early and mid 1990s. Some of the local institutions were newly established themselves, often starting with less than one hundred students. Local institutions and their partners in the UK often openly acknowledged the difficulties that students could have in gaining access to suitable reading and learning resources. It was no surprise, therefore, that the QAA auditors questioned the comparability of the student learning experience at several of the Gulf institutions to that which would be received at the UK partner institution. The expectations placed on the Gulf institutions, especially the newly established ones, may have been a little unrealistic initially (concerning things such as library stocks and learning resources), but it gave them a target to aim for, and most institutions now claim that their library and learning resources provision has reached an appropriate standard.

While the QAA may expect programmes to be contextualised to suit the local environments in which they are offered, in some respects it makes few allowances for local culture, religion or politics when assessing the comparability of the student learning experience at overseas institutions and their UK partners. For example, one institution in the UAE had not stocked books by authors that were known to be Jewish as they believed that they had a moral and legal obligation not to do so. The QAA audit team felt, however, that restrictions on learning materials based on grounds of the author's race or creed may be excluding students from a body of important knowledge and scholarship.

Unfortunately, none of the QAA reports obtained for their last round of visits in the Gulf made reference to the HND. It may, therefore, be unfair and inappropriate to consider the mismatch between the students' positive responses about the HND and the negative ones made by QAA about non-HND programmes. In fact, the majority of negative comments made by students in the survey related not to the HND but to institution-specific issues or problems, their lecturers or the lack of useful or necessary learning resources.

Dubai Polytechnic has been one of the most successful institutions in the UAE to recruit students to a range of qualifications awarded by UK universities (Bournemouth, Hull and Leeds Metropolitan) and UK awarding bodies such as Edexcel BTEC, NEBS Management and the Chartered Institute of Marketing. It was established by the Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 1997 and was given generous subsidies to fund rapid growth. In addition to having excellent library and IT facilities, students at Dubai Polytechnic also have access to the Chamber of Commerce's own substantial library resources. By mid 2000 Dubai Polytechnic had nearly 1000 students enrolled on a range of undergraduate, postgraduate and professional programmes in the areas of

Business, Banking, Computing, Graphic Design, Management and Tourism. The Polytechnic is also one of the first institutions in the UAE to offer research programmes (an MRes accredited by the University of Hull and collaborative PhDs with various UK universities).

While the reports of BTEC's external verifiers have been largely complimentary, Dubai Polytechnic has not yet had an inspection visit by the QAA. The polytechnic's founding Director and Associate Director both previously held senior management positions at a UK university and, although the faculty is multiracial, the majority are British educated and familiar with the British system of education. The polytechnic's management and academic staff have genuinely attempted to implement best educational practice in customer care and quality assurance as implemented in the UK. Occasional scandals that have been reported in local newspapers indicate that some competitors in the UAE do not operate proper quality management systems. The favourable image and reputation of Dubai Polytechnic in the local market may be due in part to its association with British higher education, gained through both the recruitment of a largely British educated faculty (about two-thirds with PhDs) and its offering of UK accredited programmes. However, as stated earlier, because of "political" factors relating to the local recognition of HE qualifications, some of its UK accredited programmes are in the process of being replaced by qualifications accredited by the local Ministry of Higher Education. The new qualifications have been designed to offer dual accreditation (UK/UAE) but it is still unclear whether there will be a market for this and whether the UAE Ministry of Higher Education will allow it.

Qualifications framework for higher education

The 1997 report of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) put forward a framework for higher education qualifications for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland had a separate committee. The principal components of a qualifications framework are qualifications, levels and credit. The main purpose of such a framework is to position all higher education qualifications relative to one another to facilitate the comparison of qualifications both in the UK and abroad. A framework would provide clear and accessible information to both students and employers, clarify routes for progression and lifelong learning, establish a common currency for credit accumulation and transfer, and increase the movement of students between different countries.

The NCIHE called on the QAA and all other interested parties to endorse their proposed framework. The UK is not alone in trying to create a framework for higher education qualifications. The 1999 Bologna declaration, to which the UK is one of 29 signatories, aims to establish a system of easily readable and comparable qualifications in Europe and the creation of a credit system to encourage student mobility.

In July 2000 the QAA proposed a framework for higher education consisting of six levels (QAA, 2000). Three of these levels were below the level of honours degree as the QAA did not want to merely reflect the qualifications

currently available but to take account of the predicted future growth of provision below honours degree level. However, after further consideration and consultation with HE practitioners and employers, the QAA finally decided in November 2000 on a simplified framework consisting of five levels (Times Higher Educational Supplement, 2000c, p.68):

Level 5: Doctorates

Level 4: Master's degrees

Level 3: Bachelor's degrees with honours

Level 2: HE Diplomas/Foundation degrees/Ordinary Bachelor's degrees

Level 1: HE Certificates

Universities are expected to modify or change their qualifications and course descriptors so that the new framework can be implemented from 2003-4.

Foundation degree

In February 2000 the Department for Education and Employment (DFEE) published details of a proposed new two-year vocational degree to be awarded by UK universities (Foundation Degrees: A Consultation Document). The foundation degree has been designed to meet a gap in the labour market for higher technician and associate professional level employees. Edexcel BTEC has observed that the core components of the foundation degree and its BTEC Highers (HNC and HND) are very similar (Edexcel Foundation, 2000). The DFEE argued, however, that the HND is a full-time programme of study that provides little opportunity for applied learning and that enrolments have dropped by a quarter in the last five years. The foundation degree will be delivered flexibly to encourage wider participation. However, 38.5 per cent of the student sample in the UAE and Oman colleges were studying on a part-time basis and the majority were successful in achieving the HND in three years.

About twenty consortia of universities, colleges and employers will pilot the foundation degree in the UK from September 2001. The foundation degree will sit at level 2 in the QAA's HE qualifications framework alongside Edexcel BTEC's HND (THES, 2000d, p. 3). The DFEE has made it clear that it expects the foundation degree to eventually subsume existing qualifications such as the HND.

The foundation degree resembles a likeness to the United States' model where the equivalent qualification is the associate degree (THES, 2000a, p. 3). UK universities such as Essex, Middlesex and Nottingham Trent have already developed associate degree programmes. Lecturers union NATFHE objected to the name "foundation degree" and argued that "associate degree" would have been more appropriate (THES, 2000b, p. 4). Some have suggested that use of the term "degree" may be contrary to the Bologna Declaration which requires higher education qualifications to fit into two cycles of study, one leading to a bachelor's degree and the second to a master's degree or doctorate. However, it is generally accepted among the European signatories that a bachelor's degree will involve at least three years of full time study while the foundation degree will only require two years.

There is clearly plenty of scope for misunderstanding the foundation degree; some may assume that it is as good as a degree while others may confuse it with degree foundation years. While the DFEE and QAA have clearly considered how the UK higher education framework and UK qualifications will satisfy the requirements of the Bologna Declaration to fit into the European framework for higher education qualifications, there is no evidence that they have considered the implications of their decisions outside Europe, for example, how students in the middle or far east may react to the title "foundation degree". It may have been useful to consider, at least to some extent, how the UK and European HE frameworks compare to that of the United States, the world's market leader in providing higher education for foreigners both at home and overseas.

If the foundation degree starts to replace the HND in the UK, as the DFEE predicts, then it is likely that the foundation degree would also replace the HND in the Gulf region as both education providers and students would want the qualification which was better known and which offered the greatest "exchange value" in the labour market or for progression to bachelor degree study. It is likely, however, that the majority of students in the Gulf would rather gain an award from a UK university than from an awarding body such as Edexcel BTEC. Both students and employers in the Gulf often find it difficult to grasp the concept of awarding bodies and they remain confused about the status and quality of non-university accredited awards.

If, indeed, the foundation degree increases in popularity first in the UK, and then overseas, the situation will provide a new opportunity for universities such as Leeds Metropolitan which are keen to develop the foundation degree. Leeds Metropolitan University was one of the universities selected to offer a pilot from September 2001 and it already has a presence in the UAE.

Conclusions

A survey conducted by MORI in 1999 (THES, 1999, p. 4) involving hundreds of "well-informed" professional people in thirteen countries found that the reputation of British institutions, courses and qualifications came second only to the United States. In almost every country, British universities and colleges were seen as more disciplined and regimented than their American counterparts. 44 per cent of respondents regarded the overall quality of British higher education as very good while another 44 per cent saw it as fairly good. Nearly a quarter said they would choose a British qualification over others.

This study revealed that 94 per cent of HND students participating in the survey in the UAE and Oman were satisfied with their programme, and 59 per cent intended to progress to a British top-up bachelor degree. The majority of both students and employers agreed that the HND prepared students for employment to some extent. While 62 per cent of the student sample believed that the UK offers the best higher education worldwide, 60 per cent of employers in the UAE would favour a candidate with an American degree rather than a British one.

Students in the UAE and Oman, especially at master's level, are very interested in UK university rankings, the results of teaching and research assessments and the results of QAA audits in their home countries. For example, this is clearly reflected in the number of enrolments on MBA programmes at different institutions in the UAE. The higher the ranking of the UK partner, the greater the number of students on the programme at the partner institution in the UAE. The work of the QAA clearly helps maintain the confidence of students, prospective students and employers in the quality of British higher education offered overseas. As students become more internationally mobile (many students from the Middle East already study in countries such as France and Germany), they will become more interested in the concept of an international framework for higher education where individual qualifications are easily comparable and progression pathways are clear. With universities and awarding bodies from countries other than the UK (notably from the USA, Canada and Australia) also trying to increase their presence in the Gulf, it is vital that the UK government's strategic HE planning and policy making pays greater attention to overseas markets outside Europe if the UK is to achieve its global market share targets.

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